Article

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# 'They'd already made their minds up': understanding the impact of stigma on parental engagement

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**ABSTRACT**

International scholars have argued that parental engagement in education is influenced by social class inequalities. Goffman's definition of stigma has been applied to interpret working-class mothers' experiences of stigma when attempting to engage in their children's education. However, this paper also draws on recent extensions of 'stigma' – by considering how and by whom the concept is developed in practice. Selective case studies have been used to illustrate how some working-class mothers feel judged negatively by teachers and the school system, based on their marginalised (and sometimes multiple) social identities. Perceptions of stigma were recalled by parents, who felt this negatively impacted upon their engagement in their children's education. They expressed feelings of powerlessness and in some cases internalisation of stigmatised traits. Recommendations to inform engagement strategies for schools to enable a more inclusive educational experience are made and areas for future research identified.

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stigma; parental engagement; attainment gap; educational inequalities

## Introduction

The seminal role that parents can play in children's education is well documented (LaRocque, Kleiman, and Darling 2011) as are the different experiences parents from varied socio-economic backgrounds may have in engaging in their children's education (Carter-Wall and Whitfield 2012). Despite this, class-based stratification in education has been an enduring feature within a system that proposes to be 'the great equaliser' (Mann 1848). The British educational attainment gap in Maths and English GCSE (that is, between disadvantaged 16-year-old pupils and their peers) at the end of secondary school is currently 18 months, despite considerable policy and practice focus (Department for Education 2020). This paper draws on recent developments of stigma, relating to wider societal and political contexts, to explain why some disadvantaged parents struggle to engage with the education system and which ultimately, may leave these students at a further disadvantage.

In an educational context 'disadvantaged' is defined by being eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) within the last 6 years, being a child in care. In England, the government

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provide a 'pupil premium' grant to schools in order to decrease the attainment gap for the most disadvantaged children, whether by income or by family upheaval (Education & Skills Funding Agency 2020). There is debate surrounding the efficacy of using the pupil premium as a measure for disadvantage (Ilie, Sutherland, and Vignoles 2017) but for this paper the pupil premium will serve as a useful method for operationalising class in an educational context as it is the predominant measure within educational and social science research in the UK.

International literature demonstrates the existence of educational class stratification in exam performance (Grodsky, Warren & Felts 2008), vocational secondary education (Shavit & Müller 2000) and access to higher education (Marginson 2016). Indeed, more privileged families have been shown to enjoy the opportunities provided by school systems in order to secure the most favourable outcomes for their children (Triventi, et al. 2019). Ballantine et al argue that such class-based stratification imposes barriers upon working-class families accessing inclusive education (Ballantine, et al. 2017) particularly in terms of supporting their children's education (Lee and Bowen 2006). These barriers have been attributed to factors such as lower parental educational attainment (Evans 2016), time and resource constraints (Muller 2018) and lack of knowledge of the school system (Reay and Vincent 2016). As will be discussed, these barriers can significantly impact on parents' encounters with school, and sometimes leave parents feeling judged and stigmatised based on their class identities.

With levels of poverty in the UK at 30% and 66% of children in poverty living in working families (receiving an income less than 60% of the national income average, Department for Work and Pensions 2020), this paper provides a timely addition to the discourse around social mobility and the barriers facing some working-class parents. Below we will discuss how perceived stigma may negatively impact on working-class families' ability to meaningfully engage with their children's education, meaningfully being defined by Goodall and Montgomery as parental feeling of ownership and agency in their children's education (Goodall and Montgomery 2014).

## *Class, stigma and power*

Goffman, in his seminal book 'Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity' (1963) defined the experience of stigma as 'an undesired differentness' that can lead an individual being viewed by the general population as being 'lesser in some way' (Goffman 1963, 3). Since this introduction of stigma, the concept has been reviewed and developed significantly in relation to societal inequality. Traditional definitions of stigma have focused on the individual and how their trails may be deemed unacceptable by wider society. Tyler has proposed that stigma should be reconceptualised to explicitly include an acknowledgment of stigma power, arguing that the focus and challenge should be on those who use stigma to assert their power, particularly in political contexts (Tyler 2018, 2020). Within this reconceptualisation, those in positions of power advocate a narrative that demonises those receiving state welfare, utilising images of welfare dependency. Through doing so, the attention and blame for austerity (and many other social ills) are diverted from those implementing potentially punitive policies and on to the individuals in poverty.

In 'Stigma: The Machinery of Inequality' Tyler highlights the ways in which misogyny and stigma are related, how welfare systems have historically contributed to poverty stigma and details the 'uneven geography of austerity' (Tyler 2020). Tyler argues that working-class northern coastal communities in the UK are deliberately placed at a disadvantage by those involved in centralised power. In a similar vein to Tyler, this paper shares the experiences of those living in poverty in working-class northern communities and how their encounters with systems perceived to be against them result in feelings of powerlessness, judgement and frustration.

Stigma is bound up in 'access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differences, construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct groups, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination' (Link and Phelan 2001, 363). This understanding of stigma has social and political implications, being 'intimately linked with neoliberal governance' (Paton 2018, 919) and associated with the political and economic imperatives of financial capitalism (Scambler 2018). It is through this lens that stigma is being applied within sociology (predominately by symbolic interactionists) to develop a better understanding of pressing contemporary problems of social decomposition, inequality and injustice (Tyler and Slater 2018).

Traditional approaches, predominately from a social psychological perspective, often neglect to appreciate structural factors that may influence the experience of stigma (Tyler and Slater 2018, 731). Through understanding that 'stigmatisation takes shape in specific contexts of culture and power' (Parker and Aggleton 2003 17) it is clear that 'stigma feeds upon, strengthens and reproduces existing inequalities of class, race, gender and sexuality' (Parker and Aggleton 2003, 13). Within this paper, we respond to Tyler and Slater's argument that contemporary literature 'frequently neglects to address structural questions about the social and political function of stigma as a form of power' (Tyler and Slater 2018, 729), by exploring this stigma as a form of power within the education system.

According to Lott and Bullock (2007), working-class families, particularly mothers (Jones et al. 2004), can be stigmatized though being negatively stereotyped and discriminated against both interpersonally and institutionally. On an interpersonal level, some working-class families feel that they are viewed as a burden to society-as lazy, irresponsible, and opting for an easy life (Reutter et al. 2009; Williams 2009; Ellis-Sloan 2014; SmithBattle 2013). These experiences may cause individuals to monitor their presentation of self to deflect judgment and blame (Ellis-Sloan 2014) and use a variety of strategies to protect their perceived social and personal identities. These strategies include confronting discrimination directly, disregarding responses from others, withdrawing and isolating themselves from others (Reutter et al. 2009). The mothers to whom we spoke provided accounts of when they felt negatively viewed and were treated differently, perceiving this to be because they were working-class mothers. They described a number of the strategies mentioned above, such as challenging discrimination directly, but alsowithdrawing from engaging with their children's schools.

Working-class families may indeed internalise stigmatisations, by for example, internalising the stereotype that they are less worthy than others (Reutter et al. 2009), impacting negatively on self-esteem, leading to depression and feelings of exclusion (Corrigan et al. 2016). A common strategy is to withdraw from potentially stigmatising situations, which can lead to isolation (Lannin et al. 2016). Although such strategies might preserve self-esteem by decreasing encounters of stigma, isolating or withdrawing from others may lead

to further exclusion from potential support and contribute to social isolation. The case studies presented in this paper describe how the experience of feeling stigmatised can indeed negatively impact on working-class mothers' self-esteem and in some cases, result in an acceptance of the stigmatising assumption that they are less able than the school to support their children's education. Others, however, responded to their experiences by taking action to arrange alternative provision for their children's education where they did not feel stigmatised, such as changing schools or removing their children from mainstream education.

On an institutional level, stigma is perpetuated and exacerbated by social ideologies and institutions. The neoliberal climate has seen stigmatised labels applied to people experiencing financial hardship in ways similar to that of medical pathology (Hansen, Bourgois, and Drucker 2014). Stigmatisation has been used as a concept to understand the experiences of those living in poverty within the contexts of housing (see Shildrick 2018, for an account of how poverty propaganda, stigma and class power influenced the response to the Grenfell Fire in London) and education (Yandell 2013). Within an education context in the UK, Yandell argues that policy makers have allocated the root cause of working-class underachievement as being a problem in the outlook of working-class people themselves (Yandell 2013, 13). The mothers in our research provide supporting evidence for these arguments, or at least, this is how their experiences of engaging with the educational system are interpreted and internalised.

## *Class inequalities in educational sociology*

Class-based stratification in parental educational engagement has been explored by a number of sociologists (Crozier and Davies 2007; Reay 1996). Crozier argues there is a difficulty or 'separation between home and school', a process she refers to as 'marginalization' (Crozier 1999, 320). This marginalisation excludes working-class parents from accessing the knowledge, skills and social networks to navigate the educational system. Using Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu 1984), Crozier proposes that this perception derives from parents' frame of reference as 'being poorly educated', influencing how they see themselves and how they should, or feel able to, act. These experiences may impact upon parents' self-confidence in their perception of their role in their children's education. For some working-class parents' concern about being seen as a 'pushy parent' by the school may deter parent's involvement in fear of possible detrimental effects on their child (Crozier 1999). The experiences described by mothers in this paper illustrate this perceived separation between home and school, leaving them feeling marginalised and in some cases, accepting the stereotype that they are ill equipped to effectively support their children's education.

Lareau proposed that middle-class children's parents adopt strategies of concerted cultivation, developing a sense of entitlement, whereas working-class children present 'an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences' (Lareau 2011, 3). Lareau observed this behaviour in working-class parents, who were more likely to accept the actions of persons in authority who presented more distance or separation from the school than did middle-class mothers. Indeed, some working-class parents appeared 'baffled, intimidated and subdued' when communicating with teachers (Lareau 2011, 409). Like the mothers to whom we spoke, working-class parents appeared less aware of their children's school situation and dismissed school rules and structures as

'unreasonable.' Some working-class parents expressed frustrations over communication leading to feelings of powerlessness (Lareau 2011).

Contemporary class analysis scholars acknowledge how issues surrounding intersectionality, such as gender and race, can influence working class families' experience of the education (Ball 2003; Devine, et al. 2005; Reay 1998). For instance, Reay (2004) argued that class is deployed both as a resource and as a form of property through categorisations of race, gender, nationality and sexuality (Reay 2004). Savage argued that class distinctions and inequalities are as real and powerful than ever, fuelled by a transmission of advantage and disadvantage (Savage 2000). Beverley Skeggs, in her ethnographic study with white working-class women from North-West England, found that relentless self-doubt and self-scrutiny characterises some working-class women's everyday actions and decisions. Within this context they were fearful of scrutiny and the negative judgements of being adequately respectable, in terms of their clothes and appearance, displays of femininity and their caring practices (Skeggs 1997). This paper contributes to the literature on class-based inequalities in education by applying Goffman's definition of stigma to explain these experiences of relentless self-doubt and self-scrutiny. These experiences will be analysed through Tyler's reconception of stigma as being a tool of class oppression.

## Research design

The accounts presented in this paper are selected case study examples from a wider research project that sought to better understand the perceived barriers faced by families in supporting their children's education, particularly those from areas experiencing significant poverty. The research was conducted in post-industrial coastal communities in north-west England, areas often referred to in policy as 'left-behind' (Sensier and Devine 2017). These towns and communities are labelled as: 'left behind by poor standards in existing provision, limited access to educational institutions and a lack of employment opportunities, resulting in low levels of aspirations' (House of Lords 2019, 3). Furthermore, such communities are often characterised by high levels of deprivation (Sensier and Devine 2017) and children are vulnerable to educational isolation (Ovenden-Hope and Passy 2019). By focusing on this specific faction of the white working-class, this paper is adding to the literature on the specific experiences and challenges described by some others (Skeggs 1997).

Within this larger study, 77 parents and caregivers of secondary school children, considered disadvantaged (i.e. eligible for pupil premium funding), participated in community-based focus groups or interviews to identify their experiences of educational engagement in primary and secondary education. Gatekeepers and their positionalities in accessing our sample was given serious consideration and consequently participants were recruited using community-driven, snowball sampling, rather than using the traditional recruitment channel through schools. For a detailed account of the methodologies undertaken in this study, see Wilson, (2020). The ages of participants ranged from 24 years old to 65 years old, and the mean age was 34 years old. Most participants were females (n = 58), with male participants making up a small proportion of the sample (n = 19). All participants described themselves as 'white British', which is representative of the ethnic demography of the communities included in this research.

The focus groups asked, 'who inspires your kids?' and 'whose job is it to build your kids' ambitions?', the answers to which informed the subsequent schedule for the interviews. Questions asked within the interviews included 'How much contact do you have with teachers? What was this for?', 'If you wanted to contact a teacher, how would you do it?', 'How do you find talking to teachers?', and 'What kinds of things do you talk to teachers about?'

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus were used as a framework to analyse and understand these accounts. Results of the overall project found that families experienced discomfort and difficulty in accessing secondary education, but not primary school. Families attributed this experience to a physical and symbolic distance from secondary school, where they felt they lacked the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) to successfully navigate the secondary school system. Families also felt that their attitudes and values were at odds with those within school system, which resulted in a misaligned habitus between parents and school. Though the larger study was interpreted using Bourdieu, this paper draws on the concepts of stigma presented by Goffman and Tyler to provide an alternative analysis of the experiences of working-class parents and why they often feel so marginalised from the education system.

## *Sample, methods of data collection and analysis*

A multiple selection case study methodology (Yin 2009) has been adopted to provide detailed insight into the experience of mothers. Case studies have been previously used to explain the experiences of marginalised groups in education, such as Indigenous Australian students (Chirgwin 2015) and Latina high school students (Vetter, Fairbanks, and Ariail 2011). Research was conducted using the 'saturation' concept and discontinued when no additional data was being added by the interviews (Saunders et al. 2018). Typical case sampling was used to select five cases which provided accounts of similar cases, in that these cases shared a number of characteristics typical to the sample (such as being a mother and experiencing barriers when engaging with school), but with different stories to tell within this context. The case studies presented here were selected on account of both their diversity and connectivity of overarching themes. The stories described in this paper were selected because they powerfully typified the experiences of many parents interviewed. Mothers were selected to illustrate the emerging theme of gendered values surrounding caregiving.

The five mothers chosen for inclusion in this selective case study all reported not actively engaging with their children's secondary educational institutions. Being in receipt of benefits they can be classified as being 'disadvantaged. Whilst this is a rather primitive definition of class, neglecting the symbolic components of the phenomena that have been discussed above, it served as a simple tool to structure the inclusion criteria. Table 1 provides an overview of all mothers included in this case study, who have all been allocated pseudomonas to maintain their anonymity. All schools discussed were secondary academies.

Written transcripts were analysed using NVivo, where transcripts were initially coded according to emerging themes, such as negative experiences of secondary school. Supplementary analysis of the research data on parental engagement revealed the relevance of Goffman's conceptual framework of stigma (Goffman 1963) and this framework was then applied to the findings. The concept of stigma was analysed using Goffman's definition

**Table 1.** Overview of case study sample.

| | |
|---|---|
| Gemma (aged 37) | Gemma was a single mother of two boys, aged 21 and 12. Gemma was not in employments and has limited education. Gemma has a history of conflict with the educational system, as well as other statutory services such as the police and housing. |
| Janet (aged 41) | Janet was a single mother one boy aged 16 and one girl aged 13. Janet was working as a home carer and left school with limited qualifications. Janet has attempted to further her education in various industries, such as hospitality and education, but struggled to complete courses whilst working. |
| Casey (aged 27) | Casey was a young married mother of a 12 year old girl. Casey worked as a cleaner and left school with limited educational qualifications. Casey reported being bullied at secondary school and worried that her daughter was also bullied. |
| Andrea (aged 35) | Andrea was a young, single mother of two boys, aged 19 and 17, and a girl aged 14. Andrea left school with some educational qualifications and worked her way up to lower management in retail. Andrea's daughter experienced health issues during secondary school which impacted on her relationship with the school. |
| Lindsay (aged 42) | Lindsay was an unemployed married mother of three boys, aged 19, 17 and 15, and one girl aged 13. Neither Lindsay nor her husband worked due to health conditions and both had limited educational qualifications. Lindsay removed her two oldest boys from mainstream education due to conflict with the school and home-schooled the boys. |
| Julie (aged 38) | Julie was an employed married mother of one daughter, aged 13. At the age of 9 her child, who was born a boy, began to identify as being female. Julie worked alongside the primary school to accommodate her child's needs but felt that this was not respected at secondary. Eventually Julie transferred her daughter to a different school which felt better met her daughters' needs. |

of 'an undesired differentness' where individuals are viewed as being 'lesser in some way' (Goffman 1963, 3). This was then applied within a context where feeling viewed as being 'lesser in some way'. Tyler's reconception of stigma, poverty stigma in particularly, was then applied to interpret the experience of parents, describing how stigma can be experienced as a manipulation of power by authority figures, in this case, teachers (Tyler 2020).

All transcripts were then reanalysed with references to these themes and cases were narrowed down on account of their strength of explaining these key themes. Thematic analysis was used to identify key generative themes emerging from the data. Key direct quotations were then extrapolated from the data and used to frame the structure of the results section.

## Key findings

Following analysis, findings were organised under two theme headings: 'stigma as feeling viewed as being "lesser in some way"' and 'stigma as "an undesired differentness"'. It must be noted that it is the interpretation of mothers' engagement with education, their perception of stigma and their consequent behaviour that is the focus of this paper. Whilst the results cannot infer the attitudes and practices of the teachers and schools discussed in this paper, it serves to illustrate the lived experiences of mothers and how these may impact on engagement with the school.

### *Stigma as feeling viewed as being 'lesser in some way'*

Mothers' accounts often revealed feeling judged on their ascribed social identities, such as being a single mother and being unable to work, and that they were viewed as being 'lesser

in some way'. Georgina has a history of conflict with teachers, along with other authority figures such as the police. Throughout her experiences, Georgina stressed how she felt that the way she was perceived impacted on the way she was treated by others. Georgina, a single parent, recounted how she felt during meetings with some secondary school teachers:

> …you're sitting down and they're looking down their nose at you. That's what makes me mad. They think 'because she's a single parent…', that makes it worse, I'm no different to anybody else, but a lot of people don't see it like that (Georgina)

Here, Georgina feels that she is being judged on a social attribute, causing anger and the experience of injustice towards school, illustrating how some working-class parents' experience of stigma in education and the psychological impact of such. The experience of being in meetings at school provide an example of how stigma power, where those in positions of power discriminate against those who do not fit the ascribed vision of model parents, operates to leave parents feeling powerless, judged and frustrated (Tyler 2020).

Young mothers spoke of feeling viewed as being 'lesser in some way' on account of their age. Angela's father was in the armed forces which meant she moved around a lot growing up. Angela achieved some GCSEs at school and worked her way up to management level in retail. Despite having power and authority in her working life, Angela did not feel able to exert any authority in a school setting. Angela expressed that her experience of a parents evening made her feel so uncomfortable she refused to attend subsequent events, and that teachers talked to her as though she was 'more like a pupil than a parent' assuming that she 'didn't know what [she] was doing' (Angela). Here, Angela describes an experience of possessing a 'spoiled identity', where she experienced a power imbalance resulting in withdrawal from engagement with the school. Parents evening, a time where parents and teachers are supposed to meet to discuss the progress of a child, is characterised by an experience of subordination and feeling 'lesser in some way'. Angela described how she thought teachers felt she lacked the necessary skills to effectively engage in their children's education although she does possess and use these skills in her work. Through this, schools and teachers are exerting their power, their assumed superior status, over these mothers. The subsequent discomfort experienced by Angela and other mothers at parents' evenings and other meetings created an experience inequality and injustice, where ultimately, open dialogue is prevented, which in many cases, will impact on children through reduced home school relations.

The internalisation of the stigma of being a young mother have also been shown to impact on engagement with school. Angela shows how a perception of stigma can be internalised, 'that knocked me, having the kids young, I wouldn't have the confidence to approach a professional person because I would think I was under them and I felt belittled before I even got there'. Here, Angela illustrates how she has accepted the stigma of a young mother, felt unequal to the teachers, and not competent to challenge them. Interpreted though Tyler's reconception of stigma as being a tool for political oppression, particularly drawing on work with northern coastal communities, these experiences of mothers can be viewed in the light of recent discourses surrounding poor, young mothers in family policy (Goodall 2021).

By referring to teachers as 'professional' Angela is assuming a subordinate position ('I was under them'), clearly illustrating an acceptance of the stigma power exercised by schools. This internalised stigma impacted negatively on Angela's confidence, resulting in a withdrawal of contact with school, suggesting Angela feels she lacks the ability to engage

with teachers and the education system. The concept of 'professionalism' is a medium through which stigma operates alongside perceptions of 'traditional', white middle class stereotypical family life. These notions promote certain rules of school and acceptable behaviour, creating power stigma as, a way of shifting blame onto others, and a method of social control.

Some accounts explicitly note the stigma mothers experience. Lindsay described how her childhood was 'good' before her parents' divorce, which caused her to 'go off the rails' and is when her brother's lifelong drug addiction began. These experiences gave Lindsay a strong desire to avoid stigma by creating a loving, stable home for her children, and encouraging them to reach their potential. Lindsay's difficulties began when her two sons were said to be presenting disruptive behaviour in their final year at primary school. She describes feeling 'branded' at school, and that her children have also experienced such judgement, 'once a dog's got a name, that's it, they get blamed for everything'.

Julie had experienced trauma in her own childhood, defined by the suicide of her father. In subsequent years Julie ran away from home on a number of occasions and was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. Despite these challenges, Julie worked hard to create a stable home for her daughter and completed a degree in Psychology at the of 34. Julie also ran a support group for people with bi-polar disorder. Given these experiences it could be assumed that Julie possessed some of the skills required to effectively navigate the education system. However, Julie evokes awareness of stigma when she describes her experiences of dealing with school: she feels judged and powerless, and labelled. Julie describes this experience as: 'if they blacklist you that's it, you're the black sheep without knowing more'. Georgina described how she felt the teachers responded to her attending meetings at her son's school, 'Teachers will see me walking in and most of them will be ducking out the back door'. These accounts describe examples of teachers withholding access and feeling their children are being treated unfairly. Viewed through the lens of Tyler's stigma power it be argued that those stigmatised by the school system are deprived of the same educational experience as their wealthier counterparts (Tyler 2020). Whilst these accounts cannot be taken to be the actual ways teachers behaved, it does again illustrate the subjective perception of stigma power, embedded in the interpretation of being judged to be 'lesser in some way'.

### *Stigma as 'an undesired differentness'*

Mothers included in this case study often spoke of their stigmatising experiences as being 'an undesired differentness', evoking feelings of anger and injustice. On an interpersonal level, mothers describe their stigmatising experiences as being associated with injustice, often generating feelings of anger and frustration. Lindsey, who encountered a number of challenges with her sons' secondary school, describes the structure of one to one pastoral meetings and the impact they had upon her, 'every time I had a meeting, I burst out crying, and it's embarrassing. I'm sitting here with [everyone] around me. Once when I went into a meeting there was six of them and me. I felt so intimidated'. Here, Lindsey describes considerable distress, which, in accumulation with a series of other events, resulted in Lindsey withdrawing her son from mainstream education. The experience of injustice was echoed by Georgina when reflecting on a pastoral meeting, 'they weren't listening to us when I was in that meeting. It was like they'd already made their minds up first'. Accounts from parents reveal a common experience of feeling unheard and disrespected, which as Lindsey's account clearly shows, can have negative psychological consequences and impact

on engagement. Interpreted through Tyler, mothers acutely experience teachers exerting their dominant position, their stigma power, which exacerbates the feeling of 'undesired differentness'. It also provides a clear example of how stigma power operates to exclude those who do not fit within an ascribed system.

On an institutional level, parents' evening was felt to assume that all parents could attend and fully understand their responsibilities. Lindsey described that in the last parents evening she attended the teachers 'didn't tell us the information that we'd need. Dismissed, next, out'. This account highlights the standardised, prescriptive way parents evening are perceived, which does not cater to the specific needs of different parents. Janet, who worked as a carer explained how she found it difficult to attend parents' evening due to her working rota, 'there was no way I could go in to it…once you've missed that parents evening there isn't an opportunity to meet all the teachers again'. Here, Janet provides an example how the inflexible structure of the parents evening system can impact upon parents' who work unsociable or unpredictable hours. The experiences of parents' evening described by Lindsay and Janet suggest that they feel they lack the skills capital to navigate the system, in that they were not privy to the information that they needed. This shows how stigma power can operate on a systematic level, where those working anti-social hours are placed at a disadvantage and excluded.

Parents perceived failure of the school to appreciate the ways in which their financial limitations impacted in their lives, in that some mothers needed to work unsociable hours. This is interpreted by mothers like Angela and Lindsay as injustice, where schools are exerting their stigma power in being the dominant class with privileged information and the power to control when and where parents can access this information.

It is not only the structure of school that is perceived to be potentially stigmatising and unjust. Julie, whose daughter had very specific needs, provides a particularly illuminating account of her experience navigating the secondary educational system, 'this power balance that we had set up at primary schools has now gone so far in our detriment, those professionals don't listen, they don't care. They do not give any weight in a parents' judgement or support options'. Here, Julie compares what she perceived as an equal, positive relationship with the primary school her daughter attended, with an unfair system at secondary, where it was felt teachers and other professionals hold their positions of power, to the detriment of her daughter. Julie goes on to describe the actions she took to attempt to overcome this perceived injustice:

> I've shouted and screamed at them. I've sent them cleverly worded letters [but I'm] at the point now where there's no point attending…I trust none of them anymore after all we've been through. No trust. Every time I offer trust I'm betrayed

Despite numerous attempts, Julie felt that her efforts were pointless, which resulted in her withdrawal from communicating with the school and eventually moving her child to another secondary school. Julie's accounts strongly illustrate her experience of teachers exerting their stigma power, which Julie responded to with various strategies and eventually enacted her power in removing her daughter from the school.

The accounts above provide examples of how working-class mothers often report to be keen to engage and are passionate about defending their children but feel these efforts are stifled by an institution that systematically is set up against them, both on an interpersonal and institutional. By this, we are not arguing that mothers lack the skills to be effective

parents, rather, we are arguing that they feel negatively judged, powerless and deliberately placed at a disadvantage (Tyler 2020). This experience is embedded in the perception that symbolic power is being exercised by teachers and schools, which is self-affirming in rendering mothers to feel helpless to challenge authority.

## Discussion

Goffman's definition of stigma has been applied using Tyler's notion of stigma power to interpret mothers' experiences of stigma when attempting to engage in their children's education. Mothers reported feeling viewed 'as being lesser in some way', based on being a single mum, a young mum or unemployed and talked about how this was expressed through interactions in parents' evenings and one to one meetings. An 'an undesired differentness' was also described, which was experienced on an individual and institutional level. These experiences caused a great deal of anger and distrust in the education system, which again, led to a withdrawal from communication with school and engagement in education. These accounts do not endorse a deficit model of parenting, rather they illustrate the difficulties and complexities involved when parents engage with school. They also highlight the ways in which stigma can, at least be precepted to, operate within an education system where schools exert systematic power on working-class parents. These experiences imposed barriers to engagement and also left parents feeling unable to maintain a relationship with the school. This leaves not only parents at a deliberate disadvantage, but also the children, who will ultimately be deprived of the benefits of strong home school relations (Alston-Abel and Berninger 2018).

The experiences mothers have described in this paper adds to literature documenting working-class parents marginalised position in the education system, which at times feels stigmatising. For example, parents have interpreted experiences of school as being stigmatising towards their children with SEN, manifested through public stigma and stigma by association (Uba and Nwoga 2016). The accounts in this paper are similar to those expressed by parents experiencing the exclusion process in the UK (Hodge and Wolstenholme 2016; Wright et al. 2012). Here, parents described the emotional strain of engaging with a system that was felt to be predisposed to support teaches, where they enforced power inequalities, where teachers are positioned above parents (Hodge and Wolstenholme 2016; Wright et al. 2012). This experience has been evidenced in exclusion elsewhere, where teachers applied negative stereotypes to single working-class mothers, resulting in parents, especially mothers, feeling powerless and 'looked down on' (Gazeley 2012, 304).

The mothers in this paper perceived that they had a number of 'spoiled identities', in addition to their 'disadvantaged' status, including being female, unemployed, single, or young. The issue of intersectionality demonstrates the complexities associated with salience and adds to existing literature (Devine et al. 2005; David et al. 2003; Ball 2003; Reay 2004). Mothers accounts provide confirmatory evidence to Savage's proposal that class-based power inequalities remain a feature in modern society, embedded in class distinction and a transmission of advantage (or lack of) (Savage 2000). These findings, indicative of the many others in wider study, provide contemporary contribution to Savage's arguments surround class-based distinctions in the 21st century. As with the women in Skeggs' study,

the mothers' in this paper were consumed by self-doubt, in this case about how they could adequately support their children's' education, expressing fear regarding how they were perceived by teachers. Indeed, the accounts provided demonstrate that Skeggs' arguments are still relevant some twenty years after her study was published.

The findings presenting in this paper respond to Tyler and Slater's argument that contemporary literature 'frequently neglects to address structural questions about the social and political function of stigma as a form of power' (Tyler and Slater 2018, 729). The mothers' accounts illustrated clearly how stigma serves as a social and political function within education, which was expressed both on an interpersonal and institutional level. From an interpersonal perspective, mothers described how the experience of being stigmatised negatively impacted on self-esteem and led to feelings of exclusion, adding to previous literature (Corrigan et al. 2013). Mothers also told of how they were worried about being seen as an incompetent parent (SmithBattle 2013) which was sometimes internalised (Reutter et al. 2009). From an institutional perspective, mothers explain their interpretation of encounters with school as being prejudiced, with teachers displaying a poor attitude of working-class people (Yandell 2013). It also suggests how this can lead those in marginalised or stigmatised positions in society to mistrust and fear the educational system. Here it is not argued that the education system and teachers are explicitly stigmatising these families. Rather it is an invitation for those who work in the field of educational practice or policy to consider how families from marginalised positions may interpret their dealings with the education system.

The experience of mothers discussed in this article clearly indicate the power of effective (or ineffective) communication skills. Training should be made available for all teaching staff, which allows them to critically reflect on their communication skills and methods with parents, and how these may need to be adjusted for the needs of different parents. Furthermore, alternative methods of communication that are familiar to working-class should be considered. These may include text messages and the use of apps such as WhatsApp (Addi-Raccah and Yemini 2018) which can be used to negotiate appointments and provide parents a less threatening method of communicating with the school than telephoning the school receptionist, which can feel intimidating to those who already feel marginalised by the school system. Schools policy should regularly review their parental engagement strategies, including meetings and parents evening, with this mind. Furthermore, school leaders are encouraged to critically review existing practices, which implicitly exert systematic power inequalities over parents. Examples of such may include reviewing the accessibility of parents evening, where extra sessions may be held either in the school or in specific communities, catering to the specific needs of parents.

### *Limitations*

The accounts described in this article are derived from a small, purposeful sample, whereby experiences cannot be generalised to the experiences of all working-class families. Moreover, the sample neglected to account for middle-class parents who struggle to engage with their children's school. It is important to consider middle-class parents' experiences of engaging with school, especially to avoid assumptions about working-class deficit ideologies that

propose that working-class parents lack the qualities necessary for successful engagement in education. Not all middle-class families engage well with the education system, particularly when their child is experiencing difficulties with school (Wright et al. 2012). More research in needed to better understand parents' disengagement with their children's schooling to identify if class-based stigma does in fact cause this disengagement in working-class parents.

There is considerable literature both on parental gender stereotypes in education (Archer and Leathwood 2003; David et al. 2003) and the role of gender (Skelton and Francis, 2012; Reay 2002). The experiences outlined in this paper refer only to that of mothers, neglecting to account for the experiences of fathers and male caregivers. This is neglecting the possibility that men may also be in marginalised positions in education. More research is needed to understand gendered social identities in parental educational engagement research.

## Conclusion

Goffman's definition of stigma interpreted using Tyler's reconception of stigma provides an alternative way of understanding the reasons why some parents may not actively engage with their children's school. The accounts of mothers in this paper describe a system that is interpreted to be against them, experienced through stigma power, which ultimately prevents them from feeling able to engage with school. Stigma power, this paper argues, operates at both interpersonal and institutional levels, leaving parents feeling frustrated, judged and powerless, and placed at a deliberate disadvantage. Practitioners and policy makers alike must critically reflect on how their practices and policies may impact on poor parents' experience of engaging with schools in order to promote a balanced and reciprocal relationship. This issue, in an age of widening social divisions and class stratification, is of most importance, because in order to have a fair society, all families, from all background should feel entitled to access the same quality of education.

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